

The Science of Hand-Reading in Sufism¹

By René Guénon

THE author of a recent article on Muhy-id Dīn Ibn `Arabī expressed surprise at finding in the works of this Sufī, side by side with purely spiritual doctrine, numerous considerations on astrology, on the science of letters and numbers, on symbolic geometry, and on many other things of the same order which he appeared to regard as quite unconnected with the doctrine itself. But in fact, whenever there is any question of spiritual or metaphysical doctrine, these traditional sciences normally spring from it by way of application, just as consequences derive from a principle. Thus, far from being in the nature of adventitious or heterogeneous elements, they form an integral part of Sufism (*Tasawwuf*).

Most of these traditional sciences are completely unknown to Westerners today; of others they know only more or less unconnected bits and pieces, often so degenerated as to have become nothing more than practical "recipes" or mere "arts of divination," clearly devoid of any doctrinal value. To show by means of an example how far from reality such a way of looking at them can be, here are some notes on what is, in Islamic esoterism, the science of hand-reading (*ilm al-kaff*), which moreover is only one of the many branches of what we might call, for want of a better term, "physiognomy," although this word does not do justice to the full extent of the Arabic term (*ilm al firāsah*) which denotes this group of sciences.

The science of hand-reading, strange though it may seem to those who have no notion of these things, is directly attached, in its Islamic form, to the science of the Divine Names: the main lines of the left hand trace out the number 81 and those of the right 18,² which makes a total of 99, which is the number of the qualitative Names (*al-asma' as-sifātiyyah*). As to the Name *Allāh* itself, it is formed by the fingers in the following way:

¹ Le Voile d'Isis, 1932.

² That is, in the Hindu numerals which have been used for centuries in the world of Islam except in North West Africa, where the Arabic numerals are still used. The Hindu 81 and 18 are respectively like a Roman 6 and 4 upside down. (Translator's note).

the little finger corresponds to the *alif*, the ring finger to the first *lam*, the middle finger and the index to the second *lam* which is double, and the thumb to the *ha'*; and here lies the chief reason for the wide-spread use of the hand as symbol in all Islamic countries (a secondary reason being connected with the number 5, whence the name *khums* which is sometimes given to this symbolic hand). We may understand, in the light of this, the meaning of the verse in the Book of Job: "He hath placed a seal (*khatam*) in the hand of every man, that all might know His work"³; and it may be added that this is not unrelated to the essential part played by the hand in the rites of benediction and consecration.

As to the correspondence between the different parts of the hand and the planets (*kawākib*), this is generally known, and even Western palmistry has retained it but without being able to see in it much more than a set of conventional designations, whereas in reality this correspondence does in fact serve as a link between the sciences of hand-reading and astrology. Moreover, as we mentioned in our last article,⁴ over each of the planetary spheres there presides one of the chief Prophets who is its "Pole" (*Qutb*); and the qualities and sciences which are especially related to each of these Prophets have also a relationship with the corresponding astral influences. The list of the seven celestial *Aqtâb* (*pl. of Qutb*) is as follows: Adam (the Heaven of the Moon), Jesus (the Heaven of Mercury,⁵) Joseph (the Heaven of Venus), Idris (the Heaven of the Sun), David (the Heaven of Mars), Moses (the Heaven of Jupiter), Abraham (the Heaven of Saturn).

To Adam agriculture is related (cf. *Genesis* II is: "God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to dress and keep it"); to Jesus corresponds knowledge of a purely spiritual order; to Joseph, beauty and the arts; to Idris (Enoch) the "intermediary sciences," that is, those of a cosmological and psychic order; to David, government; to Moses, with whom is inseparably associated his brother Harun (Aaron), religious matters under the double aspect of legislation and worship; to Abraham, faith (its correspondence with the seventh Heaven is closely connected with its situation, according to Dante, on the highest of the seven rungs of the initiatic ladder).

³ XXXVII, 7.

⁴ *Hermes* (see the last number of *Studies in Comparative Religion*).

⁵ *ibid.* p. 82, note 2.

Distributed also throughout the seven planetary heavens, centring round these Prophets, are the other known Prophets (that is, those who are mentioned by name in the Qoran, 25 in number) and the unknown ones (that, is, all the others, the number of the Prophets being traditionally 124,000).

The 99 Names which express the Divine Qualities are also distributed according to this septenary: 15 for the Heaven of the Sun, by reason of its central position, and 14 for each of the six other Heavens ($6 \times 14 = 84 + 15 = 99$). The examination of the signs on the part of the hand that corresponds to each planet indicate the proportion (S/14 or S/15) in which the subject possesses the qualities which are related to that planet; this proportion corresponds itself to an equal number (S) of Divine Names amongst those which belong to the planetary Heaven in question; and these Names themselves can be identified subsequently, by means of a calculation which is moreover very long and very complicated.

It may be added that in the region of the wrist, beyond the hand itself, are the parts which correspond to the two highest Heavens, the Heaven of the Fixed Stars and the Empyrean which, together with the seven planetary Heavens, make the number up to 9.

Furthermore, in relationship with the planets, the twelve signs (*burûj*) of the Zodiac are situated in the different parts of the hand, the Sun and the Moon having one each for domicile, and the other planets having two each. The sixteen figures of geomancy (*ilm ar-raml*) also have their place, for all the traditional sciences are closely connected.

The examination of the left hand indicates the "nature" (*at-tabi`ah*) of the subject, that is, all the tendencies, dispositions or aptitudes which are as it were his innate characteristics. From the right hand may be learned the acquired characteristics (*al-iktisāb*); and since these are being continually modified, the examination must be repeated, if a thorough study is to be made, every four months. This period of four months makes up a complete cycle, in the sense that it brings us back once more to a zodiacal sign corresponding to the same element as that of the sign which we started off from, the order of the correspondence being fire (*nār*), earth (*turāb*), air (*hawa*), water (*ma'*) (these elements corresponding respectively to Aries, Taurus, Gemini and Cancer, after which we come again, in Leo, to a sign of fire, and so on). It is therefore mistaken to suppose, as some have done, that the period in question should only be three months, for

three months amount to no more than one season, that is, a part of the annual cycle, and they do not in themselves form a complete cycle.

These few indications, summary though they be, will serve to show how a regularly constituted traditional science is attached to principles of a doctrinal order and how it entirely depends on them. At the same time, they will serve to illustrate the truth that such a science is, as we have often mentioned before, strictly bound to a definite traditional form, so that it would be quite unusable outside the civilization for which it has been constituted according to this form. Here, for example, the considerations relating to the Divine Names and the Prophets on which, precisely, everything else is based would be in-applicable outside the world of Islam, just as, to take another example, onomantic calculation (a method of calculation based on the numerical values of names) whether it be used independently or as an element in the setting up of a horoscope in certain astrological methods, would only be valid for names in a language such as Arabic, the letters of which have fixed numerical values. There is always, in this order of contingent applications, a question of adaptation which makes it impossible to transfer these sciences, just as they are, from one traditional form to another. Here also, no doubt, lies one of the chief reasons why they tend to be so incomprehensible to those who, like modern Westerners, have no equivalent in their own civilization.⁶

Misr, 18 Dhu' l-Qa'dah, 1350 A.H. (Mùlid Sayyid `Ali al-Bayùmi).

⁶The data on which these notes are based were taken from some unpublished treatises by Shaikh Sayyid `Ali Nur ad-Din al-Bayumi, the founder of the *tariqah* that bears his name (Bayûmiyyah); these manuscripts are still in the possession of his direct descendants